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# *Fahrenheit 9/11*: The Temperature Where Morality Burns

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Michael Moore's 2004 film *Fahrenheit 9/11* is a visual and narrative tour de force that critiques everything from the controversial conditions under which George W. Bush assumed the US presidency to President Bush's handling of his so-called "war on terror." With its tagline "The temperature where freedom burns," Moore stresses the dubious ethical nature of the Bush administration's post-9/11 policies, especially as they redefine the US relationship between freedom and censorship. In so doing, he challenges the Bush administration's constructions of US morality as ultimately elitist and self-serving, substituting his own populist, class-based moral America(n) in its place.

For all their disagreements, George W. Bush and Michael Moore agree on two fundamental issues. The first is that even in the increasingly morally uncertain post-9/11 era, one can hold on to a morally certain vision of America and Americans (hemispheric terms that euphemistically and some would argue imperially stand in for the citizens and state of the USA in both Bush's and Moore's constructions of some collective US subject, what I prefer to call a US "we"; see Weber 2006). Of course, their moral visions of a US "we" clash, but they are morally certain visions nonetheless. The second thing Bush and Moore agree on is that the figure who is most likely to buttress their competing claims for moral authority to define who America(ns) is/are is the feminine. There is nothing particularly shocking about this, for claims to moral certainty are almost inevitably claims made from a masculine subject position (even, of course, when they are made by women), and masculine subjects almost inevitably make these claims by invoking a feminine figure as (their) moral support. What is shocking, however, is that the feminine functions in both Bush's war on terror and Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* in precisely the same way – as an apparently activated figure whose utter enclosure within traditional US discourses of

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home/nation/state make it the most censored figure of all.[1] In the Bush administration's war on terror, this was most evident in Bush's use of burka-clad Afghan women as the basis of his second-wave justifications of the bombing of Afghanistan (Rosenberg 2002; Weber 2005).[2] In Michael Moore's war on Bush, it is most evident in Moore's use of *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s central character Lila Lipscomb.

What follows is a critical reading of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, particularly its use of the feminine as the foundation not only of claims to a moral America(n) but to the moral authority of Michael Moore as the moral American par excellence. Using Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* as its analytical point of departure, this essay explores how Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* engages themes of censorship, political and pictorial trustworthiness, and crime and criminality to critique the Bush administration. What makes Moore's film both fascinating and troubling, it argues, is that each of these themes can be critically turned back onto Moore and his film, making us wonder about the moralities of Moore's personal brand of political resistance. The conclusion assesses the dangers of Moore's strategy of domesticating the feminine as the moral foundation of his discourse of resistance, pondering the implications of this move for what is a central motif of Moore's work: the relationship between justice and security.

## *FAHRENHEIT 9/11*

*Fahrenheit 9/11* begins with a black screen, against which fireworks appear. The camera pans down to a campaign platform on election night, where Al Gore and Joseph Lieberman celebrate their victory in the 2000 presidential election. As this scene rolls, we hear Michael Moore in voiceover ask, "Was it all just a dream? Did the last four years not happen? Was it a dream, or was it real?"

[1] For a reading of how gender and sexuality function in US narratives of home/nation/state, with particular emphasis on the function of the feminine, see Berlant 1997.

[2] UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, standing "shoulder to shoulder" with George Bush in his war on terror, employed the same maneuvre regarding the relationship of women of Afghanistan to second-wave justifications for the war on terror as did President Bush, even to the extent of following Bush's lead in having his wife Cheri Blair speak publicly on the need to liberate Afghan women, just as Laura Bush did in the US. Clearly, then, many of the arguments directed at Bush's discourse could also be directed at Blair's discourse. However, because Blair is not the target of Michael Moore's film (appearing only once literally as a member of Bush's posse) and because this essay concerns itself with Moore's strategies (rather than Bush's, and much less Blair's), Blair receives as scant attention in this essay as he does in Moore's film.

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This is Moore's introduction to his history of US politics over the past four years. It begins with the events that lead first to "something called Fox News" and finally to the US Supreme Court putting George W. Bush in the White House. It traces the Bush presidency prior to 9/11 during which time the new president spent 42 percent of his time on vacation and declared in front of cameras in August of 2001 that he did not spend much time thinking about Osama bin Laden. It recaps the horrors of 9/11 itself by virtually repeating how they are displayed in Alejandro Gonzales Inarritu's short film, one of those that comprises the compilation *11"09"01*. We hear the collapse of the twin towers but see only a blank screen. After this long moment, Moore cuts to the shock and horror of ordinary people in the streets caught up in this tragedy.

The film then recounts the Bush administration's reaction to 9/11 – its war in Afghanistan, its policies for Homeland Security, its passage of the Patriot Act, and finally its war in Iraq against Saddam Hussein. Along the way, Moore suggests that the Bush family's ties to the Saudi royal family – particularly their shared oil interests – largely account for the Bush administration's actions and inactions in its war on terror. The US did not invade Iraq, Moore suggests, for the reasons the administration says it did (primarily that it was a security threat to the US because of its weapons of mass destruction and Saddam's links to al-Qaeda, neither of which has been proven). It invaded Iraq for its own personal, elitist reasons (to secure the interests of US companies linked to the President Bush and Vice President Cheney's families, like the Carlyle Group, Unocal, and Halliburton, and to avenge Saddam's attempt "to kill my Dad," as George Jr. puts it in the film).

Most people would agree on this summary. Judging from commentator's reviews, however, what they would vehemently disagree on is how they would describe Moore's telling of this story. How should the film be characterized? Is *Fahrenheit 9/11* a documentary, or "by mixing sober outrage with mischievous humor," does it "blithely [trample] the boundary between documentary and demagoguery" (Scott 2004)? If "Michael Moore doesn't so much make documentaries as make movies with documents" (O'Brian 2004), then might his film be better described by comparing it to something else altogether – "muckraking social satire" (Hoberman 2004), "an op-ed piece" (Ebert 2004), "an editorial cartoon" (Scott 2004), or "a beer commercial" (Gitlin 2004)? Does Moore's "high-spirited and unruly exercise in democratic self-expression" (Scott 2004) reduce the broader political value of his work, or does the genre he seems to have created of "first-person polemic or expressionist bulletin board, or theatrical Op-Ed piece" become more politically effective?

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Differing answers to these questions have led to differing opinions about the film as a whole. Some reviewers hated the film. Of these, Christopher Hitchens is the most scathing. He writes,

> To describe this film as dishonest and demagogic would almost be to promote those terms to the level of respectability. To describe this film as a piece of crap would be to run the risk of a discourse that would never again rise above the excremental. To describe it as an exercise in facile crowd-pleasing would be too obvious. *Fahrenheit 9/11* is a sinister exercise in moral frivolity, crudely disguised as an exercise in seriousness. It is also a spectacle of abject political cowardice masking itself as a demonstration of "dissenting" bravery. (Hitchens 2004)

Far more reviewers offered (sometimes qualified) praise for the film, describing it as a "brilliant battering ram" (Travers 2004) or as "incendiary, excitable, often mawkishly emotional but simply gripping: a cheerfully partisan assault on the Bush administration'" and an "inflammatory polemic" (Bradshaw 2004). And others still were of two minds about the film. Describing *Fahrenheit 9/11* as "the liberals'" "*The Passion of the Christ*" (the 2004 Mel Gibson film that was the darling of some of the religious right), David Edelstein confessed of the film, "It delighted me; it disgusted me. I celebrated it; I lamented it. I'm sure of only one thing: that I don't trust anyone – pro or con – who doesn't feel a twinge of doubt about his or her response," (Edelstein 2004).

I would describe *Fahrenheit 9/11* as a minority report on contemporary US politics, shot through the genre of vigilante journalism (i.e. a watchful reporting style that claims to exercise a superior brand of (real) justice thanks to the personal involvement of its witness(es)). As such, it considers burning post-9/11 moral debates – about (state) censorship, political trust (particularly questions of the trustworthiness of political and pictorial images), and the relationship between (state) crime and (political) consciousness – to tell a tale about post-9/11 American morality.[3] How the film ultimately establishes the character of moral America(ns) is by apparently reactivating the role of the feminine. Overall, what makes *Fahrenheit 9/11* such an incendiary experience is that it is imbricated in every one of the themes it critiques.

[3] As I have argued elsewhere, September 11 is a liminal moment in US history – not so much as a trauma that requires a national therapeutic response but rather as a "confrontation" (Lowenstein 2001) or an "encounter" (McAlister 2001) with questions that haunt US relationships both between self and other and with(in) the self (Weber 1999). As such, post-9/11 US discourses have the capacity to place "America" and "Americans" at the threshold of a "moral remaking" (Roseneil 2001), culminating in the question, "who might we become?" (see Bentley and Hargreaves 2001; and Weber 2006). That Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* engages the moral implications of post-9/11 policies as well as performances of (the) US character(s) is therefore not at all surprising.

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That the film is about censorship is immediately evident from its title. Combining the word "Fahrenheit" with a number is a reference to Ray Bradbury's famous novel *Fahrenheit 451*, published in 1953 (the height of the McCarthy era). Setting his story some time in the future, Bradbury tells of a state where reading the written word is banned. What people read instead are images, static as well as moving pictures. Newspapers, for example, look like compilations of comic strips, broadsheets of wordless picture panel followed by wordless picture panel. And television has so intruded into everyday life that each home has several wall-sized screens. Firemen in Bradbury's future society do not put out fires; they start them, for it is these state workers who are responsible for seizing and burning any surviving books. The story's title, *Fahrenheit 451*, refers to the temperature at which paper burns.

As depressing as all this sounds, it is important to note that Bradbury's tale of state censorship and the suppression of individual rights is also a tale of political resistance. In order to circumvent state authoritarianism based upon a dangerous anti-intellectualism, a growing number of common citizens have taken it upon themselves to memorize great books and then to pass their knowledge on to future generations. *Fahrenheit 451*, then, is a story about how, when everyday individuals band together to remember the past, they constitute both a political threat to the present authoritarian state and our best hope for a future in which we will all enjoy individual freedoms.

With its tagline "The temperature where freedom burns!", *Fahrenheit 9/11* boldly proclaims that the future is now. What Moore's title infers is that Bradbury's nightmare of state censorship arrived in the US on 9/11, and America's best hope for a better future is to remember its past – not the McCarthy era but the more immediate past of the Bush presidency – so that Americans will not repeat it. By releasing his film in the run-up to the 2004 US presidential elections, Moore made no secret of the fact that *Fahrenheit 9/11* was part of his personal campaign to make sure George W. Bush was removed from the White House (Younge 2004).

In the run-up to the summer 2004 US release of *Fahrenheit 9/11* Moore's points about censorship, made implicitly through his film's title and explicitly through his film's discussion of things like the Bush administration's implementation of the Patriot Act, became issues surrounding the screening of his film as well. When the Disney Corporation, whose subsidiary Miramax had purchased the film, refused to distribute *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the film was bought back by Miramax co-founders Harvey and Bob Weinstein and marketed under an additional tagline, "The film they did not want you to see." Then groups like Move America Forward tried to pressure individual US theatres into not showing the film (O'Brian 2004; Younge 2004).

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Some have claimed that this censorship storm was of Moore's own making, helping him win the coveted Palme d'Or for Best Picture at the Cannes Film Festival (Anthony 2004; Kermode 2004) and thereby hyping *Fahrenheit 9/11*. It is difficult to assess the truth of such a claim. What is not difficult to assess, though, is that *Fahrenheit 9/11* became a must-see film in the US and beyond. The film grossed $21.8 million in the US in its first three days and had earned $100 million in the US alone by August 2004, making it the highest-grossing "documentary" of all time (Yahoo Movies Box Office Charts 2004).

Not surprisingly for an overtly political (and politically divisive) film like *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the film's success led to more cries against it, taking the form of a documentary called *Michael Moore Hates America*, a book called *Michael Moore is a Big Fat Stupid White Man* (a play on Moore's book *Stupid White Men*), and even accusations by the conservative group Citizens United that Moore violated federal election laws because he has admitted that his goal was to affect the November 2004 presidential elections (Younge 2004). All this is to say that censorship is something that Bradbury's novel and Moore's film have in common. Having said this, though, there are clear differences between Bradbury's original story and Moore's riff on it.

In Bradbury's story the past to be remembered is not of state censorship but of the great intellectual traditions represented by great literary works that preceded it. *Fahrenheit 451*, then, is as much a critique of the dystopia of the McCarthy era as it is a celebration of the intellectual utopia that preceeded it. In contrast, Moore never makes the claim that the more distant past (say, the Clinton presidency, for example) was better than the present; he merely emphasizes just how bad the near past under Bush has been and how tragic it would be to repeat this near past in the near future. As such, there does not appear to be a utopian vision in Moore's film, just a warning about our current and possibly future dystopia (a point I will return to later).

But undoubtedly the biggest difference between Bradbury's novel and Moore's suggested equivalence to it concerns the very different ways each regards the written word in comparison to the visual image. By highlighting the trivializing of information through the image while celebrating the retention of information through the memorialization of the written word, Bradbury's hierarchy of words over images could not be clearer. Rightly or wrongly, Bradbury argues that the simplicity of images and their easy manipulation puts pictures on the side of anti-intellectualism, whereas the complexity of words, and their ability to cut through and complicate what we

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see, is the epitome of intellectualism. For Bradbury, then, images are far less trustworthy than words.[4]

Writing in the early 1950s – a time when images were rapidly invading American homes through television – novelist Bradbury's celebration of the revolutionary potential of the written word is not difficult to understand. Half a century later, it is equally understandable why filmmaker Moore would reverse this hierarchy. For, now, do we not live in a visual age in which "life takes place on screen" (Mirzoeff 1999)? And if that is the case, does it not make sense that political arguments are most effective when made visual?

This is the implicit case made by Moore's film. *Fahrenheit 9/11* is much more than the splicing together of Moore's best-selling books *Stupid White Men* (2002) and *Dude, Where's My Country?* (2003), even though much of the information in each book is found in Moore's film. Rather, it is a visual (and aural) tour de force that powerfully appeals to the mediatic American mindset. As such, *Fahrenheit 9/11* is arguably less interesting for what it says than for how it says it.

How the film tells its story is through the presentation of "pictures that seem to speak for themselves" (O'Brian 2004). These images come in the form of censored media clips of "what they didn't want us (the US public) to see," popular images that the US public has seen before and therefore instantly understands, and underreported first-person accounts of what the US public actually saw for themselves. The censored clips come in three varieties: pre-rolls, post-rolls, and non-rolls. Pre-rolls are bits of footage taken while the camera is rolling but before the footage is fed live on television, post-rolls are bits of footage taken after the live feed while the camera is still rolling, and non-rolls are footage that was not broadcast.

In the style of Kevin Rafferty and James Ridgway's 1992 documentary *Feed* about the New Hampshire primaries, *Fahrenheit 9/11* runs embarrassing pre-rolls of a collection of Bush administration officials – from Condoleezza Rice to Paul Wolfowitz to the president himself – as they preen themselves for the camera (Bradshaw 2004). In these takes we see Wolfowitz soak his comb in his own saliva and then run it through his pompadour. That's

[4] While Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* offers an insightful critique of the dangers of assuming images speak for themselves, it of course neglects to fold this critique back onto Bradbury's privileging of words as pure sources of potential resistance. With this in mind, I raise Bradbury's critique of images not because I buy into his "words over images" hierarchy but for two different reasons. The first is that Bradbury's critique of the how images might work to anti-intellectual effect is a powerful one. The second is that in raising Bradbury as his inspirational source about censorship, Moore forgets (censors?) this fundamental point raised by Bradbury, a point I will critically turn back onto Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

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disgusting, and funny. But what is more disturbing is President Bush practicing facial expressions immediately before he goes live to tell the US public that the US is at war with Iraq. While humorous, these pre-rolls are not necessarily politically effective. For do we not all fix ourselves up and rehearse before we go on camera? And, if that is the case, then does that not mean the critical story these pre-rolls tell can be told about anyone? Indeed, those familiar with Rafferty and Ridgway's film know that shots of this very same type were used to question the character of then-Governor Bill Clinton, a knowledge which neutralizes the political effectiveness of using images of this type against Bush administration officials.

It is Moore's use of post-rolls that is more effective. Two post-rolls in particular stand out. There is the footage of President Bush on a golf course, golf club in hand, talking tough about terrorism to a group of journalists. Then, without missing a beat, the President turns to the real business of the day and tells the journalists, "Now watch this drive." But the most damning post-roll in the film was also probably the most important post-9/11 non-roll. Taken on 9/11, it shows the president sitting in that infamous Florida elementary school classroom. *Fahrenheit 9/11* shows us what we have all seen before – an official whispering into the President's ear, "The nation is under attack," after a second plane hit the Twin Towers. And then it shows us what the president did in response. He sat there for a full seven minutes. Because no one told him what to do, Moore suggests, the president continued to read *My Pet Goat* with the children. What is shocking about this post-roll is not only the images it presents but the fact that these images had never before been shown to a mass US audience. What is also shocking about these images is that they seem to speak for themselves. But they do not.

Never mind that Moore makes these seven minutes real for viewers by taking nearly seven minutes to present them, thereby allowing viewers to feel this time as well as to see it. These seven minutes are intercut with Moore's account of how prior to 9/11 the Bush administration ignored warnings of an imminent terrorist attack and cut funding to fight terrorism. Jumping back and forth between the seemingly bewildered Bush and this backstory, Moore speculates in voiceover what Bush must have thought during those seven minutes: Who screwed me? Was it Saddam, the Taliban, the Saudis? Undoubtedly this seven minute post-roll/non-roll speaks volumes. But, like any image, precisely what these seven minutes say, what they mean, is not self-evident. Those on the right might interpret these images as showing the president setting an example of calm for the American people. Had the president acted differently, "leaped from his stool, adopted a Russell Crowe stance, and gone to work," he might well have been criticized by some on

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the left for either "being a man who went to war on a hectic, crazed impulse" or as someone who expected the attack and used it to solidify his power, who "couldn't wait to get on with his coup" (Hitchens 2004).

I am not trying to make a case for reading these seven minutes one way or another. Rather I am trying to make the same point that Bradbury made in *Fahrenheit 451* – that we cannot trust the image alone, a point Moore makes himself (albeit very differently) in *Fahrenheit 9/11*. For if Moore trusted images alone then he would not have needed to set his pictures to provocative soundtracks. REM's "Shiny Happy People" accompanies scenes of the Bushes and the Saudis socializing. The theme song from the TV show *The Greatest American Hero* ("Suddenly I'm up on the top of the world/Shoulda been somebody else") plays as Bush addresses naval personnel and prematurely announces "mission accomplished" in Iraq. And the music from a Marlboro cigarette ad plays as Moore wonders aloud why, in spite of a terrorist's attempt to light a shoe bomb on an airplane, up to four books of matches and two lighters can be carried by each passenger on US flights.

If Moore trusted images alone, then he would not have had to calculatingly mix his images and sounds. He would not need to use clips from old US television shows like *Bonanza* to mock the collection of characters in Bush's posse or turn to *Dragnet* to underscore the administration's presumed failure to question the bin Laden family before they left the US (a "fact" that Moore reportedly got wrong; see Kermode 2004). Nor would Moore need to sample old Western and witch-hunt films and splice them with the sound bites of George Jr.

Overall, if Moore trusted images alone, then he would not have needed to manipulate never-before-seen footage by intercutting it with popular cultural sounds and images that solicit immediate, anticipated thoughts and feelings from his American viewing public. He would not have needed to exclude images and arguments that undercut his case against Bush.[5] And he would

[5] Many critics have pointed to Moore's own censorship of images and arguments. Consider, for example, Geoffrey O'Brian's comments,

> This is a film about the September 11 attacks and the war on terror that omits any discussion of al-Qaeda and Islamist radicalism, while dramatically fudging its account of the Afghanistan war, and a film on the Iraq war that avoids any discussion of the nature of Saddam Hussein's regime … Iraqi life under Saddam Hussein is represented, in a sequence that seems almost a parody of the generic propaganda film, by a montage of happy wedding parties, bustling restaurants, a little boy flying a kite, a little girl going down a slide: all of it brutally interrupted by the American bombs. Moore seems reluctant to allow opposition to express any coherent argument, even if only to knock it down, just as in *Bowling for Columbine* the arguments for gun ownership rights were entrusted to an unprepared and visibly frail Charlton Heston and to the wild-eyed brother of Oklahoma City bomber Terry Nicols. (O'Brian 2004)

Or James Berardinelli's comments about Moore's use of Lila Lipscomb,

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not have needed to set the whole thing to his own voiceover. But Moore does all of these things, and some. He does them because he, like Bradbury, knows that images do not speak for themselves. That is why he has to speak for them, all the while presenting himself as if he is speaking through them.[6]

And yet things are more complicated than this. For there are some images that Moore seems to suggest are beyond manipulation. These images are what the US public saw for themselves, first-person accounts of actual events. In 2000 the US public saw for themselves that Gore and Lieberman won the US presidential election. Moore tells us it was only thanks to Bush's cousin John Ellis (a Fox News executive who called Florida for Bush) and a conservative Supreme Court (some of whose members were appointed by the Reagan and Bush administrations) that George W. Bush ended up in the White House.

By 2004 the US public can see for themselves the devastation caused by nearly four years of the Bush presidency. It takes the form of failed

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> Maybe Moore had the good fortune to interview this particular woman while her son was still alive, so he could capture her radical shift of allegiance afterwards. But his past argues that he might not be playing things straight. Moore has a longstanding history of manipulating the truth, and we have no way of assessing whether any doctoring has been done with the Lipscomb interviews. With another filmmaker, such as Errol Morris [*The Fog of War*], we wouldn't question what's on screen. But Moore's reputation demands that we regard everything in his films with a healthy portion of skepticism. (Berardinelli 2004)

Also see Hitchens (2004) and Kermode (2004).

[6] One might argue that all of Moore's techniques are standard practice in filmmaking, even in the genre of documentary filmmaking. This is because film is always presented from a particular point of view, and as such is a commentary constructed through processes of selection and explication reliant upon the editing of images, ideas, and sounds. In light of this one might conclude that Moore's particular practices of editing images, ideas, and sounds to construct his strong authorial voice and his engaging film are worthy not of critique but of praise. While there is much to praise in Moore's work (especially the political results of that work), I would not go so far as to excuse some of his filmmaking techniques on the basis that "all filmmakers – even documentary filmmakers – engage in these same practices." To do so would be to overlook a rich debate among documentary filmmakers themselves about what constitutes acceptable ethical practices in filmmaking, a debate that has been raging about Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* since its release (see, for example, the documentary discussion list on the *Shooting People* website, www.shootingpeople.com, from July 2004), not to mention Moore's earlier films, especially *Bowling for Columbine*. Furthermore, as I have already suggested, Moore's genre of filmmaking is less pure documentary than it is what I call "vigilante journalism," a watchful reporting style that claims to exercise a superior brand of (real) justice thanks to the personal involvement of its witness(es). In this filmic genre, I would argue, ethical standards of filmmaking ought to be of the highest priority since this genre prides itself on its higher moral status vis-à-vis alternative forms of filmmaking. As such, it should not concern itself only with outcomes (the political ends of its storytelling) but also very much with the ethics of its storytelling itself (the means). This, I will go on to argue, is precisely where Moore's filmmaking falls short, especially when one analyzes the feminine (Lila Lipscomb) used as a means toward Moore's political ends.

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Homeland Security testified to by average, ordinary, under-resourced Oregon state troopers and by average, ordinary over-surveyed US citizens subjected to the restrictions of the Patriot Act. It is shown as failed US foreign policy testified to by amputee US veterans of Gulf War II and Moore's own gruesome footage of the death and devastation US foreign policy brought to Iraq. But probably most forcefully it is expressed as the failed hopes and dreams of everyday Americans to believe in the integrity of their leaders.

It is this final story – of not only lost hope but of betrayed expectations – that is the emotional and moral core of Moore's story. Unlike in Moore's previous documentaries *Roger and Me* and *Bowling for Columbine*, the figure who tells this story is not Michael Moore; it is Lila Lipscomb, a white working-class mother from Moore's hometown of Flint, Michigan.

Lipscomb first appears in a segment establishing how poor – and particularly black – youths are targeted by US military recruiters to enlist and fight in US wars like Iraq. Lila Lipscomb, a former welfare mother in a mixed-race family who now works at an employment agency designed to get people off welfare, tells Moore that the military is an excellent option for people from economically depressed Flint. She boasts that two of her children served in the military, a daughter in Gulf War I and a son in Gulf War II. To further establish Lipscomb's credentials as a true US patriot, Moore shows her hanging the American flag outside her home, which she does every day, and viewers notice she is wearing not only a cross around her neck but an American flag pinned to her lapel.

Moore often cuts away from Lipscomb to interview US soldiers caught up in the Iraq conflict. He shows some soldiers behaving badly by disrespecting an Iraqi corpse or by getting themselves charged up for war in a very *Apocalypse Now* way by playing music with the lyrics "burn, motherfucker, burn." But mostly he shows US soldiers who feel betrayed. One serving soldier tells Moore that if he saw Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld he would tell him to resign. Another soldier who did a tour of duty in Iraq tells Moore that he will refuse to return, no matter the consequences. And a number of veteran amputees discuss their disillusionment with the war and with the aftercare that each of them so tragically embodies.

But Moore always returns to Lipscomb and her story. What we learn from Lipscomb is that her son Michael Pedersen had reservations about going to Iraq, but did so because it was his duty to go. But once over there, he wrote to his mother that the war was not justified, and that she should do everything in her power to make sure that George W. Bush was not reelected. A tearful Lipscomb sits on a sofa surrounded by her family as she reads this

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letter, which she received a week after she got the news that her son's Black Hawk helicopter was shot down and he was killed. In a move echoing Moore's attempt to confront General Motors chairman Roger Smith about the 1980s closing of the Flint GM plant in *Roger and Me*, Lipscomb goes to Washington to confront President George W. Bush about his betrayal of her and her son. But, again echoing Moore's experience, she is refused entry into the White House, only to be confronted by an angry pro-war woman in the adjacent Lafayette Square, who shouts at her, "This is all a set-up," to which Lipscomb replies, "My son is dead. That is not a set up."

What Lipscomb represents is not just a mourning mother but the moral center of a betrayed America. This US "we" has been betrayed by the Bush administration, Moore's film proclaims. Because of the trustworthy images Moore presents in his film, all Americans can see that they have been lied to by the Bush administration, which apparently is the only reason Americans supported the suspension of some civil liberties by passing the Patriot Act and supported the Bush administration's war in Iraq. And because the US "we" can see the Bush administration for what it is, it can look ahead to think about what this US "we" wants to be in the future. What *Fahrenheit 9/11* tells it is that the US "we" does not have to relive this nightmarish prevision of four more years of the Bush administration. Instead, the US public can vote George W. Bush out of the White House.

This is how Michael Moore articulates American morality in relation to contemporary US politics, which are as much about Bush's war on terror as they are about Moore's war on Bush. Becoming a moral America(n) for Moore involves recognizing that the morally enlightened US "we" was not dreaming, that the past four years did happen, and that even though America and Americans did horrible things during those years, these things were not "our" fault. "We" are basically good, but because "we" were lied to "we" didn't see what was really going on. Thanks to Moore turning the "eyes of the nation" back on the big "I" of George W. Bush and his administration, "we" know more than we did before because "we" have seen what we were not allowed to see before. So the moment has arrived for "us" to act morally. Acting morally begins by acting at home – by voting George W. Bush out of the White House. This is Michael Moore's prevision of a moral America.

Like all morality tales, Moore's articulation of American morality is gendered. In particular, it makes sense only when expressed through a particular US "we" that is located in relation to specific gendered, heterosexual familial relations. The first thing to notice about Moore's US "we" is that it is both hyper-individualized and utterly collectivized at the same time. Its individualism lies in the populist spirit of Moore's work, expressed through

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his insistent first-person perspective. As Gary O'Brian argues of Moore's film,

> Its fiction is that one man – not a lecturer or a representative of a political party, but somebody you might meet at a party or in a bar – is telling you according to his own lights what's been going on in the world lately … [A]t every step, he reminds you in devastating detail how ineptly or deceptively others have told their versions of this same story. The proof of their ineptitude or deception is that he's telling things you haven't heard before, and showing you pictures that seem to speak for themselves. It's not a story about a well-hidden conspiracy: all you have to do, he implies, is look around. You could set outside the room where you're sitting and pick up the trail anywhere, right on the street. (O'Brian 2004)

Moore's populist US "we," then, is about every one of "us"; it is about every ordinary American, every US "me."

Yet this "we/me" is utterly collective. For Moore's US "me" is firmly embedded in a particular collective category, the relatively downtrodden economic and social class that does not form part of George W. Bush's "base." And that transforms Moore's US "me" into a US "we." "We" are the many middle-class but mostly working-class Americans who have suffered at the hands of these elite few and their neoliberal economic politics that benefit "them" but not "us." Moore emphasizes this point is his closing voiceover to *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Speaking of America's poor and their historical relationship with US wars, Moore ponders aloud, "It is hard to understand how the worst off are the first to step up so we can be free. All they ask in return is that we don't send them into harm's way unless it is absolutely necessary. Will they ever trust us again?"

In this closing voiceover, Moore positions himself as if he is not a part of this US "we," as if he is part of some "they" that has done the US "we" harm by being untrustworthy. This is both ironic and strategic. It is ironic because the less-off "we/me" that is the moral center of *Fahrenheit 9/11* is the moral center of every Michael Moore documentary. The only difference between past films *Roger and Me* and *Bowling for Columbine* and this film is that in the earlier films it is Moore himself who embodies this US "we/me." That in *Fahrenheit 9/11* this task falls to Lila Lipscomb makes strategic sense, for it allows Moore to claim to be speaking as a mournful "them" when he is really speaking for an "us" that reflects "him."

Lipscomb's embodiment of the moral American "we" is strategic in another sense. For it enables Moore to consider the relationship between crime and consciousness from a seemingly objective perspective. *Fahrenheit 9/11* objects to the state's extended criminalization of consciousness and the unconsciousness, whether domestically (by increased surveillance of peace

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activists and other everyday Americans) or internationally (through the Bush doctrine of preemption). In making these objections the film raises everyday Americans' consciousness about the crimes committed against them and in their name by the Bush administration, thereby locating crime in state practices and embracing Moore's brand of consciousness-raising as political activism.

Crucially it is the feminine – an everyday, poor heterosexual American mother in a mixed-race family – who makes possible this plot twist against the state. She is the link between her martyred soldier son and the all-too-unaware American public. There is no better figure to bring about "our" consciousness-raising than Lila Lipscomb. This is because Lila Lipscomb knows that American soldiers are mainly moral, and we should respect and celebrate them, even if the wars they fight are unpopular. But she also knows that America's (presumably) moral vision can be eclipsed by unjust state practices. It is for this reason that testifying to what one has seen is a moral necessity.

Lila Lipscomb, then, is someone who can offer her testimony to the failures of state policy while keeping her patriotism intact. Unlike Michael Moore, who is accused of being against everything and nothing at the same time, Lila Lipscomb is not against "America."[7] She is not even against war. But she is firmly against this war and against this president's reelection because he got "us" into this war. Lila Lipscomb moves many American movie-goers to tears when she speaks of her loss and her determination to change US policy by changing the US president. Unlike Moore, when Lipscomb is accused of a set-up or of scoffing at power, viewers generally feel pained by this accusation. For this is not an indiscriminately contemptuous woman. She is a woman who represents America's loss as (if it were) our own. For in ways that Michael Moore never could, Lila Lipscomb

[7] These criticisms of Moore come from the character of his critiques, in which Moore seems to want things all ways. In *Fahrenheit 9/11*, for example, Moore objects both to the under-resourcing of US homeland security and to the overly vigilant implementation of the US Patriot Act. Because of such inconsistencies in Moore's argument, audiences always get the impression that Moore is against something; they just don't necessarily know what the content of this opposition is. I would argue that Moore's dilemma of seeming to be against everything and nothing actually stems from his unabashed alliance with the character he constructs in each of his films as the moral core of his arguments – the relatively down-trodden, usually working-class, often racialized moral American. By elevating the underdog to the position of the purveyor of absolute good, Moore anchors his narrative about moral America(ns) in this under-appreciated character. But because there are "good" and "bad" people in whatever class, race, gender, sexuality, you name it, doing both "good" and "bad" things all the time, Moore's moral anchor pulls him into the morally ambiguous deep waters of practical problems time and again.

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represents the sacrifices of the American homefront, "our" sacrifices. She is not some traditional, stereotypically inactive homefront (Elshtain 1995; and Michel 1989). Rather, Lila Lipscomb is that unruly feminine (Irigaray 1985) who, in her determination to (re)secure the US home(front), is willing to insecure not only US state practices but also the US president himself. In *Fahrenheit 9/11*, then, Lila Lipscomb, not Michael Moore, is "our" champion. For Lila Lipscomb is who (American) movie-goers and Americans more generally trust.

## CONCLUSION

*Fahrenheit 9/11* would be just another Michael Moore film if it were not for Lila Lipscomb. And this is something that Moore himself seems to appreciate. Lipscomb explained in an interview,

> Michael Moore said he'd already been around America interviewing all different types of people [for the film]. It was the most incredible experience; he was sitting in our living room and all of a sudden, during the talking and sharing, a tear fell from his eye. His producer said afterwards, "Michael found it, he found it, he found what the movie was going to be about!" (Brockes 2004)

What a Michael Moore movie is always about is Moore's use of sounds and images to speak "truth" to "power." Truth is located in working-class or otherwise oppressed (usually racialized) Americans; power in oppressive (usually white) American elites. As such, Moore's films are always domestic tales that redress the balance between justice and security. *Roger and Me* is about the unjust closure of a GM plant that led to the economic insecurity of its workers. *Bowling for Columbine* is about the unjust promotion of America's gun culture by elites and industries that lead to the insecuring of all Americans, especially children. And *Fahrenheit 9/11* is about the unjust lies of George W. Bush and his administration that lead to insecuring not only America's poor who fight Bush's wars but also to insecuring the very idea of a moral America as the champion of democratic freedoms for all.

Moore's picture of America that seems to speak for itself is based upon two ideals – the first utopian, the second dystopian. Moore's utopian ideal is the populist belief in the goodness of everyday Americans. Moore's dystopian ideal is that in bringing forth the goodness of everyday Americans, the means seem to justify the ends. Moore's means do not involve burning books, instead they involve burning images that seem to speak for themselves but are spoken for by Moore into the eyes/souls of movie-goers.

Caught between Moore's utopian ideal and his dystopian tactics is Lila Lipscomb. Lipscomb might be read not only as a good everyday American

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with a story Moore must bring to the US public (a story which, incidentally, Moore discovered after it was made public in the US magazine *Newsweek* (Brockes 2004)) but also as Moore's means toward achieving his own ends. For this most domestic of domestic US figures – the grieving mother of a soldierly son speaking her mind to a President of the United States who refuses to listen – symbolizes the unruly homefront who, in attempting to secure home/nation, is in perfect opposition to the Bush administration's war in Iraq. As such, Lipscomb challenges the past fictitious function of the feminine as a docile US homefront/woman who needs protecting and as the stage from which the projection of US patriarchal power into the world is made possible (Weber 2002).

Lipscomb is well aware that she is voicing homefront opposition to Bush's war in Iraq. What she may be less aware of is that, by doing so in a Michael Moore film, her very personal "I/me" is translated into Michael Moore's specific US "we." Yes, Lipscomb is working class. Yes, she is a mother in a mixed-race family. But that does not mean that she supports the many things that Moore's US "we" embodies. The only content to her opposition to Bush's war in Iraq is her son's objections to that war and his untimely death. She makes no argument about oil pipelines or Bush–Saudi ties or stolen elections or the over-zealous Patriot Act coupled with the failures of Homeland Security. But by functioning as the moral center of Moore's film – as "what the film is about" – Lipscomb is fused with all of this and more/Moore. Indeed, there are two things that theater-goers regularly recall after seeing *Fahrenheit 9/11*: those seven minutes when Bush read *My Pet Goat* and Lila Lipscomb. There is no connection between these two images except the connection Moore makes between them.

In speaking against one patriarchal projection of power, Lipscomb seems condemned to speak for/as another. For within the frames of Moore's film, speaking against Bush's project means speaking for Moore's project. And while the masculinities that inform them could not be more different (Bush's Wild West cowboy vs. Michael Moore's working-class, racially sensitive, new-age guy), how they authoritatively speak for the domestic (be it state or mother) suggests that they are both patriarchal, even while they embody strikingly different political projects.

When articulated outside the frames of Moore's film, Lipscomb's project sounds altogether different from Moore's. In an interview with *Guardian* newspaper reporter Emma Brockes, what Lipscomb conveys is her loss of certainty in the idea that "the government knew best" about Iraq. And that has made her question all authority. As Brockes reports, "Now, instead of telling them to trust authority, Lipscomb is raising her seven grandchildren

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to question it. "I tell them: if you don't understand something, ask. And if you still don't understand it, go to the next level. And the next. And the next" (Brockes 2004). Lipscomb, then, is asking Americans to think. Moore, in contrast, only seems to be asking Americans to see. And, because of the way images function in a Michael Moore film, "seeing" may not mean "thinking" at all, unless it is about letting a morally certain Moore think for us.

By seeming to swap his "I" for Lipscomb's "eyes" Moore does succeed in powerfully reconsidering the post-9/11 US relationship between justice and security. And that, it has to be said, cannot be dismissed lightly. This might be among the reasons why, at the end of his ambivalent review of *Fahrenheit 9/11*, David Edelstein concludes that the film is "an act of counter-propaganda that has a boorish bullying force. It is, all in all, a legitimate abuse of power" (Edelstein 2004). But I wonder if this supposed I/eye-swap ever takes place. For how Moore uses Lipscomb in *Fahrenheit 9/11* is not to mouth the extremely complex and varied moral objections many Americans have to the Bush administration's security policies, but as a mask for his own morally certain opposition to the moral certainty of the Bush administration. In *Fahrenheit 9/11*, then, instead of looking through the eyes of Lila Lipscomb, Moore seems to poke Lipscomb's eyes out and replace them with his own. There is an eye-swap here, but it is not Moore's for Lipscomb's (as it appears to be) but Lipscomb's for Moore's.

Ultimately what this means is that Lila Lipscomb's feminine role in *Fahrenheit 9/11* may well end up containing the policies of the US state and undermining the administration of the US president. But they fail to contain Moore, to bring him back from the brink of his vigilante journalism (with all of its pejorative connotations). Instead, it is Lila Lipscomb who is contained, and in containing her, what is also contained is the possibility to re-envision the post-9/11 relationship between justice and security in anything other than the morally certain terms shared by both Bush and Moore – "us"/good vs. "them"/bad.

All this makes me conclude that Moore's abuse of power is not legitimate. Moore's cooption of the face of Lila Lipscomb as his own "I" is surely not the moral act it purports to be. It could not be more different from what Moore's film suggests it is – a swapping of Moore's "eyes" for those of Lipscomb. While Lipscomb's "eyes/I" is always coopted and framed by Michael Moore, there is another "I" that *Fahrenheit 9/11* cannot contain, the "I" suggested by its title. Turning the "eyes/I" of Ray Bradbury back onto the "I" of Michael Moore, Bradbury would surely see in *Fahrenheit 9/11* many of the things he warned America(ns) about in his novel *Fahrenheit 451*.

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